# 'Going virtual': Innovative online faculty development during COVID-19

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In response to the national lockdown in South Africa due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions adapted their programmes to meet the challenges of the disruption in teaching and learning. In line with this need, the Sub-Saharan African FAIMER Regional Institute (SAFRI) was faced with the challenge of exploring innovative ways to continue faculty development workshops. The SAFRI programme focuses on developing African health professions educators as leaders, teachers, scholars and advocates for change at multiple levels, including individual, school and university, and the health professions.[1] The faculty development workshops, which are traditionally face-to-face, are placed at the end of the 18-month fellowship. Playing a leadership role in developing and facilitating these workshops provides a meaningful learning experience for the fellows to become active role-players and change agents in their own institutions and the broader community of practice. Participation may foster capacity development in areas such as leadership for educational interventions and support for academic activities. It also provides fellows with authentic opportunities to draw on the theories and exposures that were gained during the fellowship. Some of the competencies to plan and implement the faculty development workshops include self and team management, leadership, conflict management and the application of educational skills.

## Why was the idea necessary?

In the final learning activity of the SAFRI fellowship, the fellows develop and conduct faculty development workshops incorporating diverse active participation strategies. Since the national lockdown disrupted the planned face-to-face contact sessions for this faculty development activity, the consequences would have delayed the completion and graduation of the cohort of fellows. Therefore, a decision was made to provide an opportunity for the 2019/2020 fellows to complete their fellowship by 'going virtual'. Despite the challenges and turmoil of COVID-19, and the need to adapt rapidly to the online learning environment, the fellows fully embraced this opportunity to learn new skills and prepare virtual workshops that met the desired learning outcomes.

## What was tried?

Three virtual workshops of about 90 minutes each were planned and offered on consecutive days: research supervision, integrating technology into teaching and learning, and coaching and mentoring in higher education. The facilitators notified the fellows by email of the transition to virtual workshops, and a Zoom platform was made available. Training to use the Zoom technology was offered, and within each group an 'expert' was identified to facilitate training as part of the group preparation. The groups all chose to use an online meeting platform of their own, and thus had greater ownership of hosting and managing the process. Each group sent out invitations with the links to the workshops, pre-reading materials and participation in preparatory online activities as necessary.

All participants of the workshops were thus encouraged to be fully engaged both in the pre-workshop activities, such as uploading of personal videos, and during the actual workshops through completion of online evaluations, participation in quizzes and games and use of audience response system software (see QR code below). Breakaway rooms were incorporated with good effect, and the use of applications such as Kahoot contributed to keeping participants actively, and in some cases competitively, engaged throughout the 90-minute sessions. The opportunity for colleagues to use the chat function and contribute during the workshops created a strong sense of sharing and engagement. Although the participants could not be together physically as previously anticipated, these workshops truly provided a sense of community. In the summing up at the end of each workshop by one of the facilitators, the message was clear that not only had all participants learnt about the content presented, but important new skills in online teaching and learning and faculty development had been acquired. This feedback, together with the reflections of the faculty who facilitated these workshops, informed the planning of future virtual workshop in SAFRI. In this way the workshops had delivered even more than the planned face-to-face version used in the past.

For some fellows, the transition to virtual platforms and the use of online tools was a steep learning curve that influenced the intended flow of the workshops. All the groups were led by fellows with experience of and knowledge about the online platforms, who were therefore able to navigate some of the technical challenges during the presentations. Since the workshops were collaboratively offered by fellows from across sub-Saharan Africa, a major execution challenge was the digital divide, which hindered some participants' ability to access the workshops seamlessly. These connectivity-related issues, poor sound quality from some participants and low bandwidth and lack of internet infrastructure in some regions influenced the delivery of some parts of the workshops. However, this did not detract from the overall community of practice and collegiality among fellows and faculty, which made this a comfortable virtual space that allowed everyone to contribute.

## The lessons learnt

The need to change rapidly and at fairly short notice to a different teaching medium challenged the fellows, who drew on their resilience and skills in innovation, leadership and teamwork, thus demonstrating the importance of adapting in adversity to develop new insights and skills.

The use of different strategies and activities likely supported the learning through a cognitive apprenticeship.[2]

The support that fellows and faculty provided to each other through the community of practice was a key factor in the successful outcome of the workshops. A recent study[3] concluded that the SAFRI programme is a capacity-development process through which participants are empowered through actively engaging in a supportive community of practice, with a strong reliance on the reciprocal interplay between individual and collective capacity development. The on-site sessions of the programme were heavily reliant on the face-to-face interaction and team building that occurred between participants. In the COVID-19 environment it was important that the faculty development workshops created by the fellows for the continued development of themselves, one other and the SAFRI faculty should achieve the same goal, albeit in a purely virtual environment. Previous studies on success factors for collaborative online learning have identified the importance of a constructivist and collectivist approach[4] that acts to enhance active engagement.[5]

## What will I keep in?

With the continuation into 2021 of the COVID-19 epidemic and associated lockdown, social distancing and travel restrictions, it will not be possible to resume face-to-face teaching. Therefore, the faculty development workshops hosted and delivered successfully in 2020 will be repeated in 2021. The responsible fellows will be advised to contact the previous cohort, with whom they are already in a community of practice through the organisational nature of the fellowship, for advice and support in developing their materials.

While the future of online learning looks exciting, we will also heed the cautionary advice to seek out tested practices[6] and accommodate the challenge of diversity and equity in access to the technology,[7] particularly in the resource-constrained African environment where large differences exist in connectivity and bandwidth.

Furthermore, a review of health professional educational developments in response to COVID-19 has identified that there is a lack of good faculty development studies.[8] The intention of SAFRI is to develop robust research in this area that may provide insight into constructive faculty development activities.

### Evidence of innovation

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